

**In the Wild:
Investigating Educational Outreach and Communication Efforts Targeting Conservation**

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Introduction

Educational outreach is key to communicating about conservation. Effective wildlife management requires public engagement in conservation practices and the promotion of positive attitudes toward wildlife (Pomeranz et al., 2021). Educational outreach initiatives have the potential to play a significant role in achieving these objectives. The workforce that supports educational outreach targeting conservation practices can potentially reach younger generations more effectively by publishing efforts in popular press outlets. Leveraging research from conservation scientists, technological advancements, and the exploration of different cultural priorities also play an important role in providing effective educational programming.

The most difficult challenges facing wildlife conservation is the ability to expand educational efforts to increase public understanding of natural resources. Wildlife policy is mainly associated with political and social diversity groups (Sinclair et al., 2006). For example, in 2018, Congress considered a bill known as the wildlife extinction package that would ultimately change the Endangered Species Act, giving the power to make conservation decisions regarding listed species to local governments (Akst, 2018). In many states, policymakers faced political setbacks due to conflicts with outdoor enthusiasts who did not want to see these types of bills passed (Akst, 2018). As a result, government personnel and social alliance groups play a key role in influencing the social outreach of wildlife education. Consequently, in line with “Priority 1: Public and Policy Maker Understanding of Agriculture and Natural Resources” of the AAAE Research Agenda (Enns et al., 2016), the purpose of this study was to investigate the publicity of educational outreach and communication efforts related to wildlife conservation in popular press.

Method

We conducted a systematic literature review (Wright et al., 2007) to investigate the frequency of educational outreach efforts related to wildlife conservation practices. Literature reviews are designed to correlate findings based on specific research questions (Kim et al., 2017). We purposively selected three publications based on their shared missions related to conservation, wildlife, and outdoor life—*Outdoor Life*, *The Scientist Magazine*®, and *The Wildlife Society*. We set the parameter to include articles published between 2010–2020, and the articles must have been published for broader audiences interested in wildlife conservation. We first searched the *Outdoor Life* database using the keywords, “wildlife conservation”, which yielded 18 articles. We maintained five articles that were relevant to wildlife conservation. Second, we searched *The Scientist Magazine*® using the keywords “wildlife policy”, which produced five articles. Out of those five, we included two articles relevant to wildlife policy. Third, we searched *The Wildlife Society* database using the keywords “conservation education”. This search produced seven articles, and we maintained three. We identified 39 potential articles. We then read each article to determine its relevancy to educational efforts toward wildlife conservation, education, and policy, and we removed 29 articles. We retained 10 articles ($n = 10$) that related to conservation education, wildlife conservation, and wildlife policy. Finally, we inductively coded each retained article to identify themes and phenomena related to conservation education (Proudfoot, 2022) in the selected articles.

Results

We sorted articles based on three themes (wildlife conservation, wildlife policy, and conservation education) and identified 13 phenomena supporting educational efforts targeting wildlife conservation (see Table 1). Conservation education was the most common theme supported by the selected literature ($n = 38$).

Table 1. Summary of Themes and Phenomena Investigating Educational Outreach ($n = 10$)

Theme, Phenomena	Frequency
Wildlife Conservation ($n = 5$)	18
Access to Information	2
Community Extension	1
Ecology	2
Message Delivery	7
Policy & Rangeland Management	6
Wildlife Policy ($n = 2$)	10
Access to Information	2
Economics	1
Education	2
Environment & Water	5
Conservation Education ($n = 3$)	38
Access to Information	9
Biodiversity	6
Educational & Communication Efforts	7
Land Use	1
Policy	4
Social Views & Political Influence	11

Note. Some articles coded on multiple variables and phenomena.

Implications/Recommendations

Educational and communication strategies supporting conservation are vital because they influence policy and outreach efforts (Enns et al., 2016). While different populations and cultures around the world may value differing approaches to conservation topics and educational efforts, publishing information regarding natural resources support a broader effort of engaging the public and policy makers. As outlined Table 1, many variables influenced how educational efforts were communicated and portrayed in popular culture, such as access to information and social views and political influence, with conservation education playing a more prominent role.

It is valuable for wildlife conservationists to educate youth—through formal school-based agricultural education programs or through Extension programming—about the importance of conservation. Therefore, we recommend extending incentives for conservation and wildlife scientists to publish educational outreach strategies in other popular press publications to reach broader audiences. We also recommend communicating about educational outreach efforts targeting hands-on strategies for people in local communities to engage with conservation, such as efforts to restore riparian habitats or building fences along wildlife corridors. Similarly, we recommend researching the familiarity of conservation practices in different regions in the United States.

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